

Popular Culture and Libraries: An Overview

by Susan Steinfirst

As a "studiable" phenomenon and discipline, popular culture is only about thirty years old. In 1967 Ray Browne, an English and folklore scholar, went to Bowling Green State University where he formed the Department of Popular Culture and the Center for the Study of Popular Culture and, in 1969, the Popular Press. Also in 1969, the Popular Culture Association was formed. The decade of the 1970s saw "the transformation and growth of the popular culture studies movement from its embryonic stages to the threshold of intellectual maturity," according to Wayne Weigand.¹ Scholarly journals concerned with popular culture began and flourished: from Bowling Green came *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *The Journal of American Culture*, *The Journal of Cultural Geography*, *Clues: The Journal of Detection*, *Popular Music and Society*, and the newer *Journal of Popular Literature*. *Popular Culture Scholar* and *Popular Culture* are two journals unaffiliated with Bowling Green, and *Popular Culture in Libraries*, edited by Frank Hoffmann, has just begun publication.

The period since 1980 has seen a proliferation of secondary sources on popular culture and increased scholarly work in the field. The Popular Culture Association held its twenty-second annual meeting in 1992, hosting twenty-five hundred scholars. The call for papers for the 1993 annual meeting invites papers on culture and religion; eros, pornography and popular culture; film; high school culture; Japanese fiction, prose, and poetry; media bias and distortion; musicals; Operation Desert Storm; Ray Bradbury; the Three Stooges; Vietnam; and working class culture, to name but a few of the topics. There will be a session on libraries and popular culture at the Popular Culture Association, and both ALA and the Modern Language Association (MLA) already have discussion groups on popular culture. In high schools, colleges, and universities, courses dealing with some aspect of popular

culture — science fiction and fantasy, film, or mass media studies — have also proliferated. In 1980 Ray Browne estimated that over one million students were studying some aspect of popular culture.² Academically, respect has come to popular culture study and research.

Only the oldest among us did not grow up with television, in the classroom and at home, and with music "attached to" our ears. We are a listening and seeing public, as well as a reading public. Television, films, video games, and popular music are enjoyed by all classes of Americans. There is even a crossover among musicians and artists. For example, Yo-Yo Ma recorded an album with Bobby McFerrin, and Bobby McFerrin conducted the San Francisco Symphony. High school students and young adults today are "drenched in popular culture during their out-of-school hours."³ More and more popular literature is being published, sold, read, and enjoyed by record numbers of people. Libraries have not escaped this. As Gordon Stevenson, a popular culture scholar, has noted, "all libraries are touched by popular culture."⁴

If this is so, why has the relationship between popular culture and libraries been characterized as an "uneasy" one?⁵ Why do some public librarians still resist buying best sellers, paperback romances, and popular music, despite the fact that nonusers have said that they do not use the public library because it does not have the material they want?⁶ Why don't university and college libraries systematically collect materials to support courses on popular culture and scholars who study it?

The reasons are many and varied. Surely lack of funds, inadequate bibliographic control, the ephemeral nature of many of these items, and general organizational and preservation problems are part of the reason. However, it is clear that some librarians are "intellectual snobs,"⁷ aesthetically conservative,⁸ and "caretakers of a traditionally defined, microscopic view of culture."⁹ Librarians, on the whole, do not read popular

literature; if they do, they read the acceptable varieties — Ruth Rendell, not Amanda Quick. They do not know what musical groups the average fourteen-year-old listens to. They watch "Mystery" on PBS, but not the soaps or the game shows (maybe "Jeopardy," but not "Wheel of Fortune"). They read *The New Yorker* but not *The National Enquirer*. They don't play video games, don't collect Barbie dolls or refrigerator magnets, and don't bowl or play miniature golf. Librarians, on the whole, are elitists, protectors and consumers of high culture. They do not appreciate cultural artifacts that "appeal to and express the tastes and understanding of a significant portion of the public, free of control by minority standards," materials that "tend to reflect the values, convictions, and patterns of thought generally dispersed through and approved by society."¹⁰

In their defense, librarians, even if they are committed to collecting popular culture materials, are often overwhelmed by the sheer masses of popular materials. It is impossible to keep up with current musicians and singers, much less all the romance novels that appear each month. Furthermore, library school students are not being exposed to popular culture, since only ten percent of library schools offer courses in popular culture.¹¹ Exposure to the vast range of these materials, and to reference sources about the various genres and types of nonprint popular culture, might help librarians respond to the patron who wants a horror book (another genre librarians never read) "just like" the Stephen King book he or she just read, or to the scholar who is studying early twentieth-century comic book heroes. Library school students need to be convinced that popular culture mirrors society, is a barometer of American culture, is eclectic, nondemanding, and democratic. Though founded on the belief that "all library patrons deserve access to unrestricted materials so that the public will perceive the library as a reasonably reliable source of information and knowl-

edge for all types of information needs,"¹² library schools must work hard to impress upon their students the continuing importance of this philosophy. Libraries should sponsor in-house training programs to ensure that staff will be committed to the principle that the library is for all the people it serves, not just the librarian, not just those who read the classics, watch "Nova," like Matisse, and listen to Bach. Librarians must learn that even though they may not approve of what people read, they must support the right of people to read whatever they choose. "Trash it may very well be," says Gordon Stevenson, "but irrelevant it is not."¹³ We in the library profession must begin to reexamine our attitudes toward popular culture and our predisposition to high culture.

The Public Library and Popular Culture Materials

The February 24, 1992, issue of *The New Yorker* magazine ran a cartoon on page twenty-nine in which a librarian in a public library is explaining to a well-dressed patron: "Oh, we don't sort things into categories like fiction and nonfiction anymore, sir. Now it's either 'popular' or 'elitist.'" This sums up — in an exaggerated fashion — the relationship between popular culture and public libraries today.

The critical writing of the 1970s, of which Gordon Stevenson's "Popular Culture and the Public Library" (1977) is typical, reiterates the themes in the introductory section of this article, that the library has always been considered a cultural institution with a mission to provide "uplifting" materials to its users. What separates the public library from the academic library, in terms of popular culture, says Stevenson, is that in the public library, the decision about whether or not to purchase popular culture materials is in the librarians' hands, as opposed to the academic library, in which this decision is determined by the curriculum and the research and teaching needs of faculty and students. Stevenson contends that public librarians are isolated, and that the people they serve are being denied their right to the culture they want. He contends that "to intervene in cultural systems, by advancing one system of culture (high culture) to the exclusion of others (most popular cultures) is not only undemocratic, it is probably a misuse of public funds and a betrayal of public trust."¹⁴ The argument by Stevenson (and others) continues: if only 15 percent of the people use public libraries, "one reason for this is probably the heavy emphasis placed on academically approved culture (along with certain types of materials from the 'upper-middle' cultural range), much of which is remote, meaningless, and useless to the bulk of the

library's potential public."¹⁵

The exchange between Nora Rawlinson and Murray Bob in the early 1980s is typical of the debate among librarians over the place of popular culture materials in libraries. Rawlinson reported on her high circulation best-seller collection at the Baltimore County Public Library, which, she said, was "based on the assumption that taxpayers provide money in order to find the materials they want at the library."¹⁶ Bob responded that readers' tastes are manipulated by big business — publishing, advertising, big bookstore chains, and that libraries are "not in business" to give people what they want, but have "a unique mission" to give people what they need: "Libraries have a responsibility to ideas, to nurturing, sustaining, preserving, and making readily available the intellectual capital of our society to anyone who may want or need it, now or in the future. Collections are built to serve over time. By doing that we show responsibility to the citizens who pay for the service."¹⁷

By the 1980s most libraries were collecting, at the least, genre fiction. In 1981 Bruce Shuman wrote that the "Demand Principle rules the public library today, and, for better or worse, determines what it will contain. Everything it contains, everything it circulates is a product of popular culture, and, in its own way, contributes to that culture." The public library, he goes on, "is funded for the purpose of being RELEVANT to the lives of those who pay for it, and, in pursuit of that relevance, it embraces and reflects the culture of those who support it."¹⁸

If, as Bruce Shuman and *The New Yorker* cartoon suggest, public libraries have committed themselves to collecting popular fiction to respond to their patrons' reading desires, they now face different types of problems. As Betty Rosenberg and Diana Herald, authors of *Genrelecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction*, state in their introduction, "What now bothers librarians is economics, not ethics — how to stretch increasingly inadequate budgets to cover both the useful and the entertaining."¹⁹ The problem of how to stretch limited resources is exacerbated by the volume of popular culture materials, both print and nonprint. Librarians find they have to abandon the normal selection criteria for fiction when purchasing formula fiction and to make selections without reviews. To maintain an adequate supply for their ravenous readers, librarians must resort to buying paperbacks — not a favorite format for most librarians. Another problem is shelving to achieve optimum use. Should the collection be integrated into the regular fiction collection or kept separate? Does the library buy all the books in a series? Does it

arrange titles in series by number or author?

Advisory service is a particular problem. Often the librarian is unable to provide the level of service for genre readers that (s)he provides to others. "Librarians should ideally be readers of the genres," say Rosenberg and Herald.²⁰ At the very least, public librarians should become familiar with bibliographies of genre fiction such as *Genrelecting* and should read enough to know the characteristics of each genre.

Librarians are generally ignorant when it comes to the musical tastes of the young. Some simply do not like contemporary popular music, although as Frank Hoffmann indicated almost twenty years ago, "... a large segment of public taste is being overlooked when libraries fail to give popular music ... fair representation in their record collections..."²¹ In the late 1970s, Timothy Hays and two colleagues studied the Piedmont area of North Carolina to determine public library use and musical preferences. They found that nonusers in cities and rural areas preferred gospel/religious, country-western, and bluegrass music to classical, semi-classical, or Broadway show music, and that in every population density users preferred popular music to more serious music.²² Many librarians, however, are overwhelmed by how extensive the field of popular music is and are wary of issues concerning copyright and censorship.

Despite grumbling in the library press and among some traditional librarians, the public library has committed itself to acquiring most types of popular literature for its patrons, while trying to resolve some of the problems that exist because of this commitment. Other popular culture materials, including comic books, tabloids, and most types of popular music, unfortunately remain outside the collecting scope of most public libraries.

The Academic Library and Popular Culture Collections

Janet Schroeder, in a fascinating article in the *Drexel Library Quarterly* issue on popular culture, discussed the use of public library collections by students, scholars, and academics researching popular culture topics. Because public libraries have, she says, consciously responded to "the expressed needs of their communities within the confines of their budgets and the necessity of providing less popular items for other patrons," many public libraries "can be expected to have substantial collections that will meet the need for primary materials in popular culture courses."²³

There is a consensus in the literature that although popular culture has been accepted among academics as a legitimate subject area of study, academic librarians, still wrestling with the high art versus low

art controversy, have reacted slowly to changes in traditional academic study. Mark Gordon and Jack Nachbar's 1980 study of academic courses dealing with popular culture identified 1,993 courses in many disciplines at over 260 schools of higher education, although they projected that there could be as many as 12,000-20,000 popular culture courses in all colleges and universities in the United States.²⁴

The implications of this study for the academic library community are sobering. It attests to the legitimacy of popular culture in higher education. That conclusion is also supported by a look at course offerings at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The 1992 course schedule lists popular culture courses in Afro-American Studies; Anthropology; English; Folklore; History; Information and Library Science; Journalism; Mass Communication; Leisure Studies and Recreation Administration; Music; Radio, Television, and Motion Pictures; Sociology; and Speech Communication. Clearly, if the mission of the academic library is to collect materials that support the teaching and research needs of faculty and students, librarians will have to acquire both primary and secondary materials in diverse fields of study and many formats.

Although scholars have been urging academic librarians to acquire both print and nonprint materials for more than fifteen years, the race to collect these materials has barely begun. As Wayne Weigand wrote in 1981: "Academic library collection development has an inertia of its own which is aided and abetted by the academic librarian's preconceived predilections, conservative training and book-oriented practical experience."²⁵ Even in 1990, Allen Ellis and Doug Highsmith reported that acknowledging the value of popular culture materials to library collections has been slow due to both cultural bias and budgetary constraints. "Explain to the chemistry professor," they write, "the validity of a *National Enquirer* subscription when the Chemistry Department has just been advised that the library can no longer afford *Tetrahedron Letters*."²⁶

Most academic librarians are aware that they are not collecting popular culture materials adequately. Academic librarians know that they must support the curriculum, and they will buy reference materials that faculty require for classes or for research if the budget allows it. Classes on film criticism require not only films and videotapes but also books about the film industry, as well as fan magazines and *Variety*. Women's studies courses might require students to look at the literature women read (romances, for example), the magazines they prefer, ads that feature women, historical and contemporary books

on housekeeping, and the artifacts that reflect changing attitudes about women (a fine example of which is the Barbie doll).

Although academic librarians are aware of the need for these materials in their libraries, they face complex problems in trying to meet the curricular and research needs of faculty and students. These problems are well documented. Many articles point out that the number and variety of materials needed by popular culture scholars are extensive. Moran's 1985 study reported ninety-one separate research interests, mostly in popular literature, film, and mass media, among scholars from many disciplines. "Everyone," Moran reported, "wants something different," mainly primary resources. Clearly, she concludes, "an academic library that maintains a primary resources popular culture collection will likely do its institution a great service."²⁷

In order to begin collecting primary source materials in many disciplines and in formats unfamiliar to many librarians, collection development will require many secondary tools that list, annotate, and rank different types of print and nonprint popular culture materials. Difficult policy decisions will have to be made. Does a library really need to collect every Regency or Harlequin novel in a series? Should libraries try to acquire large retrospective collections, most of which are in private hands? Should libraries woo private collectors, especially if the collectors insist that the collection be kept intact, when the policy of the library is to catalog all non-rare book items separately and shelve them with the general collection?

Most critics agree that the extent of popular culture materials is so vast that systematic acquisition of materials can be handled only through a cooperative approach. Many specific ideas have been suggested. In 1991 Barbara Moran envisioned an "RLIN Conspectus ... with certain libraries having designated responsibility to collect a certain specific area of popular culture in depth."²⁸ Setting up international and regional centers has been suggested. Indeed, the Consortium of the Popular Culture Collections in the Midwest (CPCCM) was recently founded as an alliance of the special collections at Bowling Green State University, Kent State University, Michigan State University, and Ohio State University. In 1990 the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) began an ongoing popular culture discussion group at the ALA annual conference. Now librarians interested in the role of popular culture materials in academic libraries can share information, support research activities, and attempt to increase awareness in the general library profession of the value of popular culture materials in research institutions.

Wonderful popular culture materials can be found in large university research libraries. The premier collection is the Popular Culture Library and the Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture at Bowling Green [Ohio] State University. In 1989 the Center had seventy thousand books, one hundred thousand serials, and extensive collections of nontraditional materials such as radio, television, and motion picture scripts and Hollywood ephemera. Other institutions with large collections of popular culture materials are the Newberry Library; the Center for Research Libraries; the University of Minnesota; the Museum of Broadcasting (New York); the Russel Nye Popular Culture Collection at Michigan State University; the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art; and the New York Public Library, especially its General Library and Museum of the Performing Arts.

A comprehensive listing of popular culture collections has been attempted — Christopher Geist's *Directory of Popular Culture Collections* (1989), which lists and annotates 667 collections from the United States and Canada. Unfortunately, many popular culture collections do not appear in this directory. This is a reflection of the difficulty of identifying these collections. Libraries that have popular culture materials often do not perceive them as such and so do not report their holdings, and a few libraries report collections that are not actually popular culture materials. Furthermore, a truly comprehensive directory would include private collections, as most critics believe the bulk of retrospective material is privately owned. This, of course, is a formidable task. One way to begin is for each state to compile a core list of popular culture materials, which should be constantly updated as new collections are identified. Eventually, the state lists should be gathered together for national publication, a task that either ALA or the Popular Culture Association could coordinate and continually update.

The other key issue is providing access to existing collections. Large university libraries often have popular culture collections stashed away in a rare book room or in another special collections department. For example, Robert G. Sewell cites substantial detective fiction collections held in the libraries at Columbia University, Kent State, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.²⁹ The Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor Collection of Crime and Detection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was not listed by Sewell, nor does it appear in the *American Library Directory* or Geist's *Directory of Popular Culture Collections*. It was not mentioned

in the response that this author and her class in popular culture and libraries received to a questionnaire that they distributed. (It would have gone unreported had not the author known about it.)

Small special collections often do not appear in a library's online catalog. In many cases, not even a contents list is available. It is apparent that most libraries do not have adequate bibliographic control of their own popular culture materials.

Conclusion

In 1985, Lee Cooper wrote that in order to begin to collect systematically, academic libraries need to train their librarians to recognize the importance of popular culture materials; devise interlibrary loan systems and methods; define the core collections of popular culture materials; and secure funding from public and private agencies. Professional organizations should appoint committees to study potential educational, research, and information uses of popular culture. Practical library manuals are needed to help librarians acquire, process, and make available these materials. Finally, Cooper cites a need for an interlibrary loan network and free reproduction rights of copyrighted popular music tapes.³⁰

There have been attempts to meet some of these challenges. Professional organizations (ALA, RLIN, MLA) have discussion groups on popular culture. Geist's directory identifies a core collection, but articles in library literature make us acutely aware that an enormous job remains to be done in order to provide scholars with the materials they need.

In 1977, Gordon Stevenson wrote: "To what extent the choice of research topics [in popular culture research] has been restricted by the unavailability of resources is a question that must haunt librarians..."³¹ Academic librarians, aware of this problem (though perhaps not haunted by it), are in fact trying to do the best they can in extraordinarily difficult fiscal times. Their challenge, as Barbara Moran stated first in 1981 and again in 1991, is to get on with the business of collecting popular culture while solving the problems inevitable with these unusual but vitally needed collections.³²

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